June 29, 2005

Draft of LA Times Op-Ed for July 3, 2005

It was with a sense of familiarity, but not nostalgia, that I heard President Bush

explain on June 28 why we must stay the course in Iraq, for as long as it ~~took~~ takes-. I had a

heard virtually all of his themes before, almost word for word, in speeches delivered by

three presidents I had worked for, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

Not with pride, I recognized that I had ~~written~~ proposed some of those very words myself.

That shouldn't have been surprising. In the spring of 1965, drafting speeches on

Vietnam for my boss John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for

International Security Affairs, and for his boss Robert S. McNamara, I had the same task

as Bush's speechwriters in June 2005: how to rationalize and motivate continued public

support for a stalemated, unnecessary war our president had lied us into.

Looking back on a draft I wrote for McNamara in July, 1965 I find I used the

word "terrorist" about our adversaries even more than Bush did in this particular speech.

Like Bush's advisors, too, I felt the need at that juncture for a global threat to explain the

scale of effort we were embarking on; for that role, I felt "China" was better suited than Ho

Chi Minh, just as Bush now prefers to focus on Al Qaeda as our adversary in Iraq rather

than Iraqi nationalists. [233]

But the note that was particularly reminiscent to me in Bush's speech Tuesday was

what the New York Times described as "a call for stoicism and endurance, during what

Mr. Bush termed, for the second time in a week, 'time of testing.'" "We have more work

to do, and there will be tough moments that test America's resolve…They are trying to

shake our will in Iraq—just as they [sic] tried to shake our will on Sept. 11, 2001."

This theme recalled for me the almost identical climactic appeal of my 1965 draft, a passage that, for reasons that will be evident, I have never chosen to reproduce before. (This particular draft was not used—though it had been approved for delivery by McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk—but the same sentiments turned up in other speeches over the next seven or eight years). I ended my argument by painting a picture of Communist China [note to the White House: substitute for China or Peking: Al Qaeda, or perhaps later, Iran, or still later, China again] as "an opponent that views international politics as a whole as a vast guerrilla struggle, in which a stronger enemy's weak points are to be found and patiently exploited. …It demands, above all, patience: and a long-term confidence based on contempt for the patience, the will and resolution of the opponent. The Peking leadership has both.

"*We are being tested.* In blunt terms: have we the guts, the grit, the determination to stick with a frustrating, bloody, difficult course as long as it takes to see it through without getting bored or despairing, without losing sight of all our objectives, without being lured by false promises of short-cuts? The Asian Communists are sure that we have not. [Bush: our adversaries "believe that free societies are essentially corrupt and decadent, and with a few hard blows they can force us to retreat."]

"The only question is how long it will take. Two years? Three years? How long will it be, they ask their listeners sardonically, before the U.S. tires of its wearisome task, how long will it maintain the efforts it has pledged?"

Bush's speechwriters faced this question—as I had to do--from the other side. "How long must the American public, to meet this particular test of resolve, support American troops as they kill and die in Iraq? They provided him on Tuesday the same workmanlike evasions that served recurrently Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon : "as long as it takes ...until the fight is won…"

I no longer commend my own proposed response of July, 1965-- "There is only one answer for us to give…" It drew on a famous riposte by Adlai Stevenson (who had died a week earlier) during the Cuban Missile Crisis:

"Till hell freezes over."